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# A malenky review of A Clockwork Orange and attitudes towards behaviour therapies

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This essay was originally written for an undergraduate assessment as part of the BA (Hons) in Psychology at Dublin Business School.

*A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess created controversy with its violent content and fuelled debate about the ethics of using behavioural psychology to limit individual choice. While the latter was the author's intent, the former was a side-effect that Burgess attributed largely to Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film adaptation.[1] What follows is a short evaluation of the impact of these effects on the field of abnormal psychology, preceded by a discussion of the novella's key points and the author's motivations.

The protagonist and narrative voice of *A Clockwork Orange* is Alex, a violent teenager who commits a series of physical and sexual assaults with his small gang before being arrested, imprisoned, and subjected to the behavioural conditioning which forms the central philosophical exploration of the novella. Besides his character being defined by his joy at "ultraviolence", Alex also has a love of classical music—particularly Beethoven—and he and his teenage contemporaries speak a distinctive fictional slang-English called "nadsat" which draws words from Russian, with elements of Cockney rhyming slang, Romani, and the Lancashire dialect of English.[2] In his essay *Clockwork Marmalade*, Burgess described Alex as "an exemplar of humanity: he is aggressive, he loves beauty, he is a language-user."[3] In academic works, Alex is often characterised as a sociopath or psychopath[4] and sometimes as displaying behaviours consistent with antisocial personality disorder.[5]

The novella is divided into three sections. The first section introduces the reader to the protagonist and his "droogs" (the members of his gang), Pete, Georgie, and Dim, as they engage in various acts of ultraviolence. There are two significant incidents: the invasion of the home of political writer F. Alexander and the assault and rape of his wife; and breaking into the mansion of a rich woman who dies from the injuries inflicted by Alex's assault on her after Alex is captured by the police.

[1] Burgess, 'Clockwork Marmalade'; Burgess, 'Stop the Clock on Violence'.
[2] Biswell, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess*, 237.
[3] Burgess, 'Clockwork Marmalade', 198.
[4] For examples, see Hesse, 'Portrayal of Psychopathy in the Movies'; Murray, Grossman, and Kentridge, 'Behavioral Psychology'; Snyder, 'Movie Portrayals of Juvenile Delinquency'.
[5] Hyler, 'DSM-III at the Cinema'. Although, Hyler noted that Alex's age would place him outside the DSM-III diagnostic criteria for antisocial personality disorder.

The second section of the novella begins with Alex's two years in prison. Burgess' central thesis is perhaps summed up when the prison chaplain tells Alex that "goodness is something chosen", explaining "when a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man",[6] a sentiment echoed by F. Alexander in the final section.[7] After Alex is involved in the death of a fellow inmate, he is sent to undergo an experimental treatment called "Ludovico's Technique", a radical crime-reduction initiative of the new Government. The treatment is based on aversive respondent conditioning.[8] In this case, drug-induced aversive stimuli (nausea, headache, and thirst), are repeatedly paired with film imagery depicting extreme violence. Subsequently, when Alex encounters violence or violent thoughts, he experiences debilitating nausea and physical pain. Because some of the violent films used during the conditioning were set to classical music for emotive effect, Alex also develops an aversion to hearing his favourite music.

The third and final section of the novella sees Alex released following the treatment. After he is badly beaten by his former droog, Dim, and once rival gang-leader, Billyboy—who are now police officers—Alex inadvertently stumbles into the home of F. Alexander in search of help. Philosophically and politically opposed to the conditioning Alex has undergone, F. Alexander, initially not recognising Alex, contacts his compatriots who want to use Alex in their political campaigning. They take him back to a flat in the city. When Alex later awakens to the sound of sickness-inducing classical music and is unable to stop it or escape, he jumps out the window with the intention of killing himself. While in hospital recovering he is de-conditioned and promised his freedom and a comfortable job in exchange for his cooperation with the Government in its efforts to save face over the whole affair. The final chapter presents an 18-year-old Alex who has assembled a new gang of droogs and returned to his life of recreational violence. However, he has begun to lose interest in ultraviolence and the novella ends on Alex's thoughts of settling down and starting a family.

This ending chapter was included in the UK edition of the book but was excluded from the first edition published in the USA, leaving the novella ending with Alex musing "I was cured alright",[9] as he lies in the hospital listening to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and fantasising about violence. Burgess expressed different feelings about this over the years,[10] but argued that it was important that the final chapter be included to show that his protagonist changed with time, as all humans do, rather than simply arriving back where he began.[11] A consequence of this difference in the USA version was that it was also omitted from Kubrick's film adaptation. Burgess considered the film a "radical remaking" but, in relation to the controversy arising from the many violent scenes, conceded: "The Kubrick *Orange* is a fruit from my tree."[12] In later years, he noted that the film "seemed to glorify sex and violence" and made it easier for readers of the book to misunderstand what it was about.[13] Discussing the film in *The New York Review of Books*, Christopher Ricks argued that the failing of Kubrick's adaptation was in subtly but systematically making the character of Alex more sympathetic to the audience and his victims less so.[14]

[6] Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*, 92–93.
[7] Burgess, 169.
[8] Goodfriend, 'Classical Conditioning in "A Clockwork Orange"'; Rosen and Hall, 'Behavioral Treatment Approaches for Offenders and Victims'.
[9] Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*, 192.
[10] Biswell, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess*, 252–54.
[11] Burgess, 'Introduction: A Clockwork Orange Resucked'.
[12] Burgess, 'Clockwork Marmalade', 197.
[13] Burgess, *Flame into Being*, 205.
[14] Ricks, 'Horror Show'.

Critically, the book itself received mixed reviews at the time it was published, most making reference to the violent content and the challenging language. Robert Taubman in *The New Statesman* called it "a great strain to read",[15] while the *Spectator* praised nadsat, noting that it "takes a few pages to grasp".[16] It was reviewed favourably in the *Observer*,[17] and some of the impact of the book is demonstrated by the fact that it is still being written about.[18]

A number of experiences and other works influenced Burgess in writing the novella. He had read and reviewed *The Unsleep* by Diana and Meir Gillon, which he saw as a novel portraying dystopia-from-liberalism and regarded as an interesting counter to the authoritarian dystopia of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.[19] He had also read Aldous Huxley's non-fictional *Brave New World Revisited*, which included a summary and criticism of the theories of B. F. Skinner. At the time he starting writing *A Clockwork Orange* in 1961, Burgess was teaching himself Russian, which had given him the idea for nadsat, and his recent reading of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* may have influenced his novella's structure.[20] He visited the Soviet Union during the writing of it, and his experiences there reportedly inspired some of the architectural aesthetic and his belief in the ubiquity of violent teenagers in all cultures. To that effect, the novella is deliberately ambiguous about its setting, hinting at no particular city or even country.[21] In relation to the depiction of violence, Burgess recounted his wife being beaten and robbed by three GI deserters in London in 1942, which is mirrored by the attack on the writer F. Alexander.[22]

Burgess' criticisms of behaviourism, and his belief that it was in conflict with the notion of free will, continued into some of this later works such as *A Fable for Social Scientists*,[23] where characters directly criticise the philosophies of B. F. Skinner by name, and *The Clockwork Testament* in which Skinner is parodied.[24] Psychologist Bobby Newman argued that these works demonstrated Burgess' misunderstanding of Skinner, noting—amongst other inaccuracies—that a respondent conditioning procedure like that outlined in *A Clockwork Orange* could be expected to undergo extinction quite rapidly through desensitisation or flooding given the ubiquitous violence which seems to be present in Burgess' *Clockwork Orange* world.[25] However, while this may be true,[26] Burgess' Ludovico's Technique bears a striking resemblance to aversion therapies that were attempted and reported as successful by behavioural researchers at the time.[27] Clinical psychologists Raymond C. Rosen and Kathryn Hall contrasted later behavioural approaches with Burgess' fictional Ludovico's Technique, noting that behaviour therapy is no longer viewed as a passive process which is performed on an involuntary participant, but rather that the specific motivation and commitment to change is considered essential in treating offenders.[28] In their 1975 review of critical issues around behaviour modification, Stolz, Wienckowski, and

[15] As cited in Biswell, 'Introduction', xxiii.
[16] Mitchell, 'Horrorshow on Amis Avenue'.
[17] Amis, 'From the Observer Archive, 13 May 1962'.
[18] For example, Amis, '"A Clockwork Orange" at 50'.
[19] Biswell, 'Introduction'.
[20] Biswell, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess*, 236–39.
[21] Biswell, 239–45.
[22] Burgess, 'Clockwork Marmalade'.
[23] Burgess, 'A Fable for Social Scientists'.
[24] Burgess, *The Clockwork Testament.*
[25] Newman, 'A Clockwork Orange'.
[26] The limited usefulness of aversion therapy was certainly known by the 1970s, for example see Dirks, 'Aversion Therapy'.
[27] For an example of this, see James, 'Case of Homosexuality Treated by Aversion Therapy'.
[28] Rosen and Hall, 'Behavioral Treatment Approaches for Offenders and Victims'.

Brown argued that the techniques shown in *A Clockwork Orange* were "imaginary" and noted that "behavior modification is not a one-way method that can be successfully imposed on an unwilling individual."[29]

Despite of these defences of behavioural methods and criticisms of inaccurate media coverage,[30] *A Clockwork Orange* had an effect on public perceptions of behavioural therapies and a consequent effect on researchers and practitioners.[31] Researchers Woolfolk, Woolfolk, and Terence found that labelling an example of a reinforcement teaching method demonstrated in a video as "behaviour modification" resulted in significantly more negative evaluations than calling it "humanistic education."[32] Behavioural methods had come to be "portrayed as inconsistent with freedom and dignity"[33] by critics and the media, and Woolfolk et al. cited associations with films such as *A Clockwork Orange* in particular. In a review of the relationship between treatment fearfulness and the utilisation of mental health services, Kushner and Sher suggested that modality of treatment could be influenced by patient preconceptions. [34] They provided the specific example that prospective patients with a familiarity with Kubrick's film "may fear that behavioral interventions will control their mind and body against their will"[35] noting that such patients should be directed towards other treatments such as psychodynamic or humanistic psychotherapies instead.

The negative portrayal of aversion therapy specifically may not have had a profound impact on aversion therapy itself given its inherent problems and evidence of lack of long-term efficacy,[36] and its later negative associations with efforts to change sexual orientation.[37] However, there was much concern in the 1970s and 1980s around the effect of negative public perceptions of behavioural therapy and behaviour analysis in general, with Burgess' work often noted as a contributor to the problem.[38] In discussing concerns about misrepresentation of behaviour analysis and the effect of public perceptions on research funding, Edward K. Morris cited *A Clockwork Orange* as a "major and obvious source of misunderstanding".[39]

References to the novella and film are less frequent in psychological literature in the past two decades, although *A Clockwork Orange* is still cited in the context of the social effects of violent media,[40] philosophical debate around psychotherapy and free will,[41] and language acquisition in relation to Burgess' creation and use of nadsat.[42] Notably, however, the use of behavioural therapies for offender rehabilitation has waned since the time that *A*

[29] Stolz, Wienckowski, and Brown, 'Behavior Modification', 1037.
[30] For another example, see Turkat and Feuerstein, 'Behavior Modification and the Public Misconception'.
[31] Bandura, 'Swimming against the Mainstream'; Young and Patterson, 'Information and Opinions about Behavior Modification'.
[32] Woolfolk, Woolfolk, and Terence, 'A Rose by Any Other Name . . .'
[33] Woolfolk, Woolfolk, and Terence, 184.
[34] Kushner and Sher, 'The Relation of Treatment Fearfulness and Psychological Service Utilization'.
[35] Kushner and Sher, 199.
[36] Dirks, 'Aversion Therapy'; Serovich et al., 'A Systematic Review of the Research Base on Sexual Reorientation Therapies'.
[37] Haldeman, 'The Practice and Ethics of Sexual Orientation Conversion Therapy'; Silverstein, 'Wearing Two Hats'.
[38] For example Boivin, Sewell, and Scott, 'Attitudes toward Behavior Modification'; Marholin, Taylor, and Warren, 'Learning to Apply Psychology'.
[39] Morris, 'Public Information, Dissemination, and Behavior Analysis', 97.
[40] Helfgott, 'Criminal Behavior and the Copycat Effect'.
[41] Evans, 'Behaviour Therapy: Regulation by Self, by Others, and by the Physical World'.
[42] Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt, 'Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition from an Authentic Novel'.

*Clockwork Orange* was written and aversive treatments are now rarely used,[43] besides the relatively ineffective deterrent of incarceration itself. [44] While it is difficult to measure the size of the effect that *A Clockwork Orange* has had in turning public opinion against behaviour therapies—and aversion therapy in particular—there is no question that it has become an archetype for negative media portrayals of behaviourism.

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[43] Gendreau et al., 'Making Prisoners Accountable'; Marshall and Hollin, 'Historical Developments in Sex Offender Treatment'.
[44] Apel and Diller, 'Prison as Punishment'; Nagin, 'Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century'; Newman, 'A Clockwork Orange'.

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